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**Ofsted's judgement of parental engagement: A justification of its place in leadership and management**

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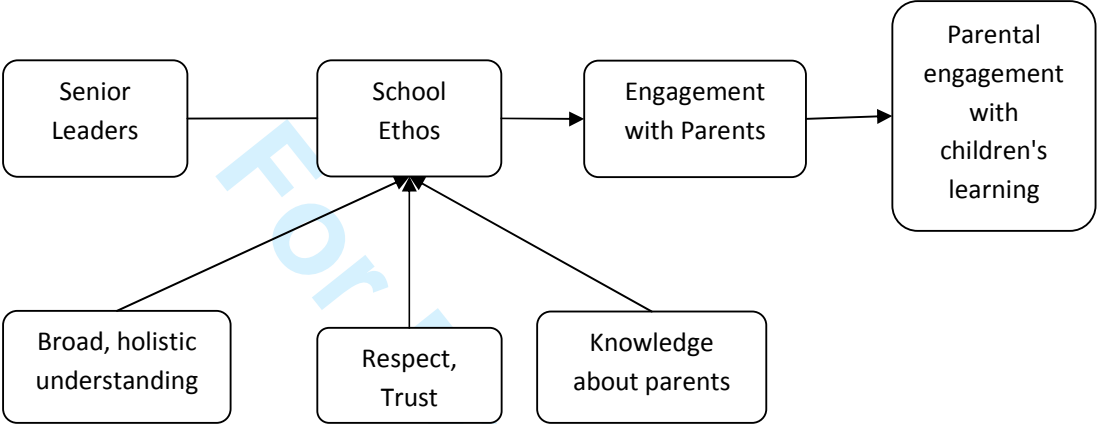


Figure 1 Supporting Engagement with Parents

## Ofsted's judgement of parental engagement: A justification of its place in leadership and management

### Abstract

This article considers the recent change to Ofsted's inspection criteria, which now includes a judgement on schools' engagement with parents, as a part of the overall Leadership and Management judgement. The article argues that this is the correct place for this judgement, linking effective parental engagement with the development of a broad and holistic understanding of parental engagement, and with the creation of ethos in the school.

### Parental Engagement and School Leadership

The value of leadership and management in schools is well known (Day, Sammons et al. 2010, Sammons, Gu et al. 2011, Bush and Glover 2012). It has been posited that the impact of leadership in schools is second only to that of classroom teaching in its effect on pupil outcomes (Day, Sammons et al. 2009, Hallinger 2011).

In this article, I present an argument upholding and explaining the place of engagement with parents as part of the Ofsted Leadership and Management judgement. The article briefly sets out the case for parental engagement. It then presents distinctions between parental and school responsibilities, and between types of engagement. It argues for a holistic view of parental engagement, and contends that this will only arise from the direct involvement and support of school leaders, justifying the inclusion of engagement with parents as a part of this Ofsted judgement.

### Parental Engagement and Ofsted

Parental engagement may be defined, following the work of Kim, as 'parents' engagement in their children's lives to influence the children's overall actions' (Kim 2009, 84). The case for engaging parents in the learning of their children has been made numerous times, (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Joe and Davis 2009, Fan and Williams 2010, Xu, Benson et al. 2010, Jeynes 2012). It is true that the evidence base is not as secure as one might prefer (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, See and Gorard 2013), and the concept is not as clear cut as it might appear (Crozier 2001, Crozier and Davies 2007, Hartas 2008) yet parents engaging with the learning and lives of their children remains an important aspect of raising achievement (Gorard, See et al. 2012, OECD 2012).

The Ofsted criteria published recently include a skimmed down set of judgements – from over 20 in the previous incarnation to only four: overall effectiveness, achievement of pupils, quality of teaching and learning and leadership and management. The grade descriptor for an "outstanding" judgement reads, "The school has highly successful strategies for engaging with parents to the benefit of pupils, including those who find working with the school difficult" (OFSTED 2014, 51).

That's a difficult enough thing to ask schools to do as it stands; as a recent publication has made clear, there is precious little robust help for schools in the literature (See and Gorard 2013). There is no shortage of practice, as many perhaps most schools are well aware of the need to engage parents (Campbell 2011). What we lack, as See and Gorard point out so sharply, is robust and reliable evaluations of all that practice (See and Gorard 2013).

However, what is most interesting to me about the grade descriptor – most interesting and most heartening – is its location. Parental engagement, for Ofsted, is firmly entrenched in Leadership and Management. Or, at least it should be so entrenched, and will be, for schools which are judged to be outstanding.

Leadership and management may not be the most obvious place to lodge issues around parental engagement. Perhaps it would seem more fitting to have parental engagement within the category of behaviour of pupils or overall effectiveness, but I would argue that Ofsted have made the correct decision. Parental engagement with schools is, or at least should be, the responsibility of the senior leaders in the schools (within which we must include governors), and needs to be firmly within the purview of leadership and management.

**Two distinctions**

There are two distinctions to be made at the outset of this treatment of the place of parental engagement in leadership and management of schools. The first that between the responsibilities of the school and those of parents, and the second is between parental engagement with children's learning, and parental engagement with schools.

Schools are not responsible for how parents interact with their children, and the Ofsted judgement does not seek in any way to hold schools to account in this area. Schools may support parents, and very good work has been done in this area (Chicola and Ceprano 2009, Cullen, Cullen et al. 2009, Jones 2009, Kristjansson and Sigfusdottir 2009, Lopez and Donovan 2009, Neumann 2009, Lewin and Luckin 2010). Effects have ranged from decreases in family tensions to increases in school attendance and homework rates, beneficial changes to behaviour and enhanced literacy rates. All of this may seem a bit unfair on schools; if the most effective forms of parental engagement take place in the home, why are schools held accountable for parental engagement. Schools are not responsible for parental engagement *with children's learning* but rather *with the school*.

However, it is generally agreed in the literature that the most powerful form of parental engagement takes place between parents and their children (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003), and may well happen almost entirely away from school (Sylva, Melhuish et al. 2008). This engagement can take many forms, but young people have told researchers that the engagement they value most is not just help with homework, or attendance at parents' evenings, or responding to school missives, although all these things might be encompassed within it (Goodall and Montgomery 2013). What young people value is the engagement and interest of their parents, exemplified in such actions as asking about school days, setting rules and limits and offering guidance (Harris and Goodall 2008). This would appear to be the sort of engagement which has an effect on achievement and other areas of young people's school lives (Fan and Williams 2010, Jeynes 2012, OECD 2012).

Parental engagement with children's learning may often wane as children age (Peters, Seeds et al. 2007, Goodall and Vorhaus 2011, Goodall and Montgomery 2013, Barr and Saltmarsh 2014) even if

parental *interest* in young people's education may increase as children age (Hango 2007). In part, this is understandable; as children age, they take more responsibility for their learning. The aim of both parenting and the education system is, after all, the production of an independent adult. And, in part, the diminution of parental engagement may be related to the change in the nature of what is being learned; parents have reported increasing discomfort with helping with homework as children age (Peters, Seeds et al. 2007) and both children and adults have reported parental inability to interact directly with the school work of older children (Peters, Seeds et al. 2007, Harris and Goodall 2008). However, as seen above, the valuable aspects of parental engagement do not focus solely - or even mostly - on school work; what schools need to support, in their interactions with parents, are the effective forms of parental engagement; discussion, moral support and guidance.

This engagement is not, however, directly within the sphere of the school. This engagement almost certainly does not take place in the school. Nor is it the sort of engagement which is inspected by Ofsted, as their focus is on the work of the schools rather than that of the parents. The most effective form of parental engagement is the responsibility of parents, rather than schools. These forms of engagement seem to build on each other, in a continuum as suggested by Goodall and Montgomery (Goodall and Montgomery 2013).

So why is parental engagement even of interest to Ofsted, and of such interest that it is one of the aspects explicitly involved in the judgement of the leadership and management of schools?

Simply put, this is because parental engagement with children's learning is, as the literature is beginning to make clear, one of the best levers available for raising achievement (Gorard, See et al. 2012), school improvement (Harris and Goodall 2008) and supporting the achievement of young people facing economic challenge (Harris and Goodall 2009). And, as the literature is also making clear, schools need to support that engagement and do so effectively. This support must be for the most effective forms of parental engagement, it must be based on a holistic view of parental engagement and it must be led by senior leaders (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011). And it can be successfully underpinned and supported by what Ofsted does inspect – schools' engagement with parents.

The Ofsted inspection is not just about how the schools engage with parents but has the added rider, "to the benefit of pupils". In other words, schools need to be able to show, or more likely, provide indications of a link between activities with parents and benefits to young people (which may be enhanced achievement, a rise in attendance or a decrease in behavioural incidents, for example).

Given the current state of research on parental engagement, schools could be forgiven for being a bit taken aback by this requirement. Recent work has pointed to the lacunae in the literature base (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011), and more recently still, See and Gorard have come to the perhaps harsh conclusion that there is no research in the field which merits the epithets of being both reliable and robust (See and Gorard 2013). If nearly 25 years of research have been unable to provide clear evidence of causality, how can schools be expected to do so?

Proving causality in educational research is notoriously difficult (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000, Marley and Levin 2011). However, schools which institute practices which support parental engagement with the school itself (and/or with children's learning) and which subsequently experience any of the

benefits mentioned above, could reasonably infer a link between the two. This may not satisfy the exacting strictures of research, but that is not the aim of the inspection process.

If schools are to do this, however, the concept of parental engagement must be broadly understood, and holistically applied.

**Broad understanding of parental engagement**

Effective engagement with parents will arise only from a broad understanding of that engagement. Schools must realise that, as detailed here and elsewhere, the most effective instances of parental engagement do not tend to happen in school (making them difficult for schools to measure and control) and that they may take forms with which school staff are not familiar or comfortable. Crozier has commented on the fact that school staff are prone to interpret "good parental engagement" as being like unto that they experienced as children themselves, a model which may be highly inappropriate for many families in their schools (Crozier 2001). Schools may not even recognise some family overtures toward engagement (Crozier and Davies 2007).

While what schools are *judged* on is their engagement with parents, what that engagement must aim at and support is parents' engagement with children's learning, understood in as broad a fashion as possible. This is clear in the research data, such as that recently emerging from the OECD; even parental discussions with young people about non-academic subjects can have a beneficial effect on achievement (OECD 2012). Unless interventions undertaken align with families' values and usual behaviours, those interventions are unlikely to have much impact. Just as good teaching relies on a comprehensive understanding of pupils and their needs, engaging with parents required this same sort of knowledge about families and communities. (Manz, Hughes et al. 2010), and these are the very situations which are likely to be at variance with teachers' own experience. Hence, there is a need for all interventions to be based on a clear understanding of the parental cohort(s) of any school (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011). Parental engagement with children's learning may not be either visible or familiar to school staff. But again, this is not the focus of the Ofsted judgement.

The Ofsted criteria mention "those [parents] who find working with the school difficult". As has been pointed out in the literature, this phrasing immediately points to the issue with engagement being with the parent, rather than with the school (Campbell 2011). It may be, however, that the situation is reversed, and parents feel that the institution, the school, is difficult to reach or access (Webster-Stratton 1998, Crozier and Davies 2007). The criteria does at least avoid the ambiguous term, "hard to reach" (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012), although that term puts the onus back on the school. This may require a change in the way families are perceived, a move from a deficient model (these families are hard to reach, do not engage) to a model which focuses on what is offered to the families (we are not engaging with them, we must work harder to reach them).

**Holistic view of parental engagement**

Parental engagement cannot be a bolt on extra to the work of a school (Harris and Goodall 2008). One way of gauging who embedded is the value given to parents is to look at school policies. Parents are generally mentioned in policies which seem to involve them directly, such as the behaviour policy, the homework and the uniform policies.

The research cited above, however, has given fairly clear indications that one of the best ways of increasing attainment for young people is to support the engagement of their parents in their learning. This cannot be done, or is not best done, only in relation to behaviour, homework and uniforms; in fact, secondary pupils have at times expressed their reluctance to have their parents involved in homework, while still affirming the importance of their moral support and guidance (Harris and Goodall 2008); these are the aspects of parental engagement which will be of “benefit to pupils”. Parental engagement, and support for it, and an understanding of the value of it, needs to be embedded throughout schools, and thus throughout school policies. If the engagement of parents in learning is not at the heart of the teaching and learning policy rather than a hurriedly added-on paragraph at the end, parental engagement is unlikely to be either as effective as possible or as deeply embedded in the life and thinking of the school as it needs to be to be effective.

This holistic understanding of parental engagement must also go beyond the concept of “the home” or “the family”, to embrace the community in which the pupil lives and spends her time. The value of communities, and community learning, is well known in the literature (Barton 1992, Overstreet, Denivne et al. 2004, Epstein and Sanders 2006, Epstein 2007, Warren, Hong et al. 2009). It has been suggested that “home, school and community partnerships” is a better term than “parental engagement” or involvement, as this captures the value of community in relation to young people’s learning (Epstein and Sheldon 2006). Even though the Ofsted criteria are couched in terms of parental engagement, this point is well made.

Engaging with parents, and supporting their engagement with children's learning, needs to permeate the ethos of the school; it needs to be a core value alongside, indeed as part of, the value given to teaching and learning. For some schools this will be relatively easy; for others, it will require a radical re-think of their entire approach. But as has been argued elsewhere (Goodall 2014), merely continuing to do more or less what we have always done will mean we continue to have more or less the same results as we have always had, results which have not adequately supported all of our young people.

### Engaging with Parents

Parents, or more widely, families and communities, are often the forgotten partner in the educational triangle of pupil-school-home. To some extent this is understandable – after all, the school interacts most often with the pupil; in secondary education, interaction with parents may be (but should not be) limited to parents' evenings and the occasional concert or award ceremony.

The important word in the previous sentence is “interaction”. Giving information to parents is not interacting (or engaging) with the, any more than merely relaying information to young people is teaching. It is a part of teaching, and giving parents information is a part of engagement, but neither is the entirety of either teaching or engagement. Schools aim for their student to grow as thinking, learning individuals – a process which requires a great deal more than being passive recipients of information.

This is such a commonplace idea in teaching (Cook-Sather 2002, Ballard 2003, Henderson and Bowley 2010) that it is slightly startling that so many schools have not made the final link in the chain; just as teaching is more than imparting information, so engaging with, supporting parents is far more than simply telling them about reading levels or predicted GCSE scores. Schools often provide good



and useful information to parents, but the provision of information is not the totality of engagement (Harris and Goodall 2008)

The first step in this process is, of course, the creation of trust, which leads us back to the validity of parental engagement as a part of the leadership and management judgement; trust will be built between parents and schools when the ethos of the schools fosters such trust.

**Led by Senior Leaders**

This leads to the next and final link in the argument linking parental engagement and school leadership. For parental engagement to be effectively supported by schools, the concepts, beliefs and values that underpin that support must be embedded in the entire school; the creation of the ethos of the school is an important part of leadership and management (Campbell 2011). Recent research has reaffirmed that parents tend to see the head teacher as embodying the authority of the school and setting its vision (Barr and Saltmarsh 2014).

The importance of school leaders - the leadership team, the head teacher and the governors - in setting and maintaining the ethos (including setting up and maintaining an attitude of trust) of schools is well known (Gold 2003, McLaughlin 2005, Day, Sammons et al. 2010, Hallinger and Heck 2011). The values of leaders, and the way that these are put into practice are what underpin positive changes in schools (Day, Sammons et al. 2009); values underpin the attitudes, speech and actions that take place in schools (Begley 2006, Begley 2010). These values feed into the culture of a school, which again must emanate from the leaders; culture may be roughly defined as “the way we do things”, or as ways of dealing with problems that have worked well enough to be considered useful and valid (Schein 1985).

This culture, to feed into effective engagement with parents, as defined by the Ofsted criteria, must include the concepts mentioned above – abroad, holistic understanding of parental engagement, a knowledge of the parents and families who form part of the school community – these form the basis of a relationship of trust and respect between families and the school. The change in perception required to reach all families must be led from the top.

Increasing or even solidifying engagement with parents may be seen to add yet more to schools’ already full timetables. Many of the activities suggested in the literature, such as increased communication, after school activities, direct work with parents, are costly in terms of staff time and resources. There is often a need for further training for staff (Dyson, Beresford et al. 2007). Teachers may be highly skilled and trained in working with pupils, but these skills may not be the appropriate ones to use when working with their parents. After all, we would not expect a primary trained teacher to take over an A level syllabus without extra support; it seems antithetical to then assume that no further training or support is needed for the same teacher to work with and support parents. Bora-Munroe and Evangelou provide a comprehensive list of institutional barriers faced by families; this might be a useful place for schools to begin to examine their own practice (Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012).

FIGURE ONE NEAR HERE

Figure 1 Relationship between Leadership and Engagement

This requirement for leaders to set and enact the ethos of a school makes clear why parental engagement is inspected as part of the leadership and management judgement, as can be seen in Figure 1. Engaging with parents is not merely a series of unconnected activities, such as attendance at parents' evening, or instituting a text alert system, or opening the VLE to parents. All of these things - and many more - can be part of engaging with parents (Goodall and Montgomery 2013), but to be effective, to be "of benefit to pupils", these activities need to emanate from an ethos of the valuing of parents in the educational process.

#### Concluding thoughts

Ofsted clearly see the importance of parental engagement and understand the link between leadership and management and parental engagement. This article has set out some of the reasons for that connection, and some of connections between the values and ethos of the school, and the engagement of parents. If we are to serve our young people as well as possible, to give them the best education we can, senior leaders must realise the value and potential of parental engagement with children's learning, and support it as a part of the core work of schools.

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